

STAYING ON THE BEAM

STEP OUT AND STAY ON

» How do we as coaches teach our gymnasts to stay on the beam?

If we teach the skills correctly our gymnasts will stay on the beam, right?

Unfortunately that is not always the case because of the transition between the skills.

We have all seen gymnasts perform advanced skills correctly and then take a step or set up for the next skill only to lose their balance and fall off the beam.

By Karen M. Goeller



Here are a few suggestions to help keep your gymnasts on the beam throughout the routine. With a step-out type skill, one that finishes in a lunge position, there are many techniques for remaining steady. One that really works well is to instruct your gymnast to squeeze her thighs together as she is stepping out. This concept is easier to understand if you pretend the gymnast is wearing shorts. If you explain to your gymnast that she should squeeze together her upper thighs, the part of her inner thighs that a pair of shorts would cover, the correction can be made. By squeezing the inner thighs together the gymnast pulls everything back above the center of the beam. She better understands how to bring the leg back to her center, directly above the center of the beam. Besides the gymnast becoming tighter, which makes it easier to keep her balance, squeezing her thighs together immediately helps the gymnast square her hips, which often prevents the flying leg and allows her to continue with her routine or series. Keep in mind that this technique works best if your gymnast's toes and eyes are facing the end of the beam upon step-out. Try this technique with cartwheels, back walkovers, back handsprings, and layout step-outs. You should see how stable your gymnasts become as a result of this simple explanation.

To correct the hip position regarding remaining square upon step-out, you can instruct her to shift her hip forward or back accordingly. If a gymnast steps down with her right foot first, you would instruct her to pull slightly the left hip forward and right hip back as she is squeezing her thighs together. She should understand how to become square during the step down.

To take the squeezing of the thighs together (adduction) concept even further, we can use that instructional technique when our gymnasts are in mid-skill. For example, if in the vertical position of the walkover the gymnast's leg is not above the beam but off to the side (abduction), she can understand pulling the leg back in line with her hip by instructing her to think of squeezing her thighs together even though her legs actually split. Once the concept of squeezing your thigh together, or pulling everything back into alignment, is introduced then so too is the concept of pulling the body above that imaginary line down the center of the beam.

Besides pulling the thighs together for stability, another key to staying on that beam is narrow arms. Now that your gymnast is aware of keeping her legs in line, let's take a closer look at our gymnast's upper body. Many of us already instruct our gymnasts to keep their arms on their ears upon completing skills, but that



phrase does not work with every gymnast. Many gymnasts pull their hands apart when their hands leave the beam. To prevent the gymnast from pulling her hands apart to complete a skill, use the phrase "narrow arms." As your gymnast is completing a tumbling skill, remind her to keep her arms narrow as her hands leave the beam. Using the term narrow seems to work well with many gymnasts.

Another concept for helping your gymnasts remain on the beam and keep their upper body in line is to instruct your gymnasts to imagine they are being squeezed between two walls. This is very easy to imagine for many gymnasts. Your gymnast will understand the concept of narrow arms with skill completion. From that point, she will be able to make great efforts keeping her arms narrow and remaining on the beam more often.

We all ask our gymnasts to keep their hips square, but many coaches do not introduce the concept of square shoulders. For those gymnasts unable to remain square and tight, try to introduce the concept of square shoulders upon completing skills. It is not always simple for a gymnast to square her shoulders, but here is one simple technique your gymnast can use. As your gymnast is completing her skills, ask her to lift the hand and arm on the same side as the step-out foot a bit earlier than the other. In other words, if she steps down with her right foot, ask her to lift her right hand and shoulder a bit earlier to help square her shoulders quickly. If done correctly, it will appear as if she lifted both arms simultaneously, but she will feel as if one arm is lifting faster. This technique will help your gymnast square her shoulders more quickly and offer more stability. The concept of lifting one side of her upper body a bit earlier than the other often helps the gymnast to square her shoulders to complete the skill successfully. This technique only works when the gymnast is able to keep her arms narrow as she completes her skills.

It sounds so simple, thighs together and narrow arms, but many coaches and gymnasts still do not use them. Once a gymnast learns these techniques, she should have a much higher success rate completing her routine without a major error. These two recommendations, thighs together and narrow arms, also work well while performing certain dance skills on beam. So give it a try with your gymnasts and see if they remain on the beam more often. ✂

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Karen Goeller is the author of the gymnastics drills and conditioning books, the swing set fitness books, and many additional products. Her books are available through www.GymnasticsBooks.com and all major book stores. Goeller offers sports performance training and consults with a gymnastics facility in NJ. For more information on Karen Goeller visit www.KarenGoeller.com.